

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

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Whole No. 312

William J. Benners

The First Historian of the Dime Novel

by Ralph Adimari

From Notes Loaned by Ralph F. Cummings

Warren E. Price from San Francisco was the first (1890) to appreciate the art of the Dime Novel. But he was no historian. He was what one would call a fan or connoisseur. He never wrote a book about it or went to great lengths to discover the authors or seek historical facts. He did get together several impressive books that listed all paper covered books published at the turn of the century, the first of their kind anywhere in the world, let alone the United States.

William James Benners, Jr., the subject of this biography, was born in Philadelphia September 27, 1863, the son of William James Benners and Frances Ann, nee Eldridge. He had two brothers, Harry H. and A. Eugene and a sister Novella all of whom he outlived. Novella was at one time employed by William H. Gannett, the famous Augusta, Maine, publisher. His father and two brothers were in the lumber business. William however, was a poet, actor and author and therefore was not interested in the mundane atmosphere of business of one kind or another. Even his family had noticed this. In a letter to him by his brother Eugene, dated Phila. May 15, 1890, he chides him on his absorption in poetry, that he should "rest his brains" instead of worrying about stories and poetry and other artistic headaches.

At this time too, when Benners was



William J. Benners

thirty years old, one of his best friends, Emma Collins, wrote of him, "In person Mr. Benners is tall and slender, with a face spiritual yet full of fire; dark eyes, and a firm mouth." (Magazine of Poetry, Buffalo V 6 May 1894). She is authority for the statement that he wrote his first poem at 10 years old, and that he went to Europe in 1881, then to California in 1883. From then on Benners was a traveller almost all his life.

He numbered among his friends, Marie Corelli, Charles Garvice, Ed-

ward S. Ellis, Gabrielle D'Annunzio, Mrs. Alexander, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Mrs. Rita L. Humphrey, Fergus Hume, Robert Hitchins, Dr. Harry Eaton, Thomas W. Hanshew, Lt. Geo. Rathborne, Lucy Randall Comfort and many others, a few of which welcomed him as guest every time he visited them.

It was just about when he was thirty that he started his vast letter correspondence with the popular writers of the day and in the years grew to such proportions that it was to dominate him rather than that he dominate it. And it was about 1900 that he envisioned a great book about the dime novel and the romantic writers which was merely a division of the dime novel. At first the book was to be known as Dictionary of Popular Writers and finally in 1912 it was to be known as Directory of the Popular novelists of the 20th Century. But unfortunately the book was never written. It never went beyond the note stage. We can only guess at the reasons for this tragic failure because Benners was a keen historian and an industrious collector of facts.

One of the reasons may be the fact that while writing to the authors he got the idea of becoming their agent in selling their output to various publishers he had become acquainted with while writing his own stories. What is more, he also began buying old published stories, short and long and

reselling them to various publishers. Among them were William H. Gan-
nett of Augusta, Maine, who published the magazine Comfort at the turn of the century and which enjoyed a circulation of a million and a quarter copies, Vickery & Hill also of Augusta who published the then famous American Woman and others. He also sold literary material to Street and Smith, F. M. Lupton and Norman L. Munro of New York City and The Chicago Household Guest, W. D. Boyce Co. publishers of the famous Chicago Ledger and Currier Publishing Co. which boasted in 1907 that its women's magazines including Woman's World totaled two and a quarter million "largest paid in advance circulation in the world," all of Chicago.

The most momentous event in this literary enterprise was when he bought the entire output of the boys' papers published by Frank Leslie years before and then out of print. This was on May 7, 1902, and the price was not revealed. So important is this sale that I shall go into details to show what happened. By 1902 the Leslie Company had ceased to publish fiction of any kind except an occasional short story in their monthly. Benners approached them the early part of that year seeking to buy the republication rights of all stories published in their old juvenile magazines, Frank Leslie's Boys and Girls

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Weekly, Frank Leslie's Young American and Frank Leslie's Boys of America. Both parties quickly came to an agreement since the Frank Leslie Publishing House figured they'd never use the stories again. After buying them for \$1 according to the legal terminology, the real price was never revealed. Benners then two months later sold the entire output to William H. Gannett for the price of \$950 receipt signed July 11, 1902. In it were also included several serials from Frank Leslie's Chimney Corner. The money was sent to Benners by Gannett on May 23, 1902 as a bank draft and receipt was not acknowledged until a month and a half later showing the artistic slow methods of Benners even in his business relations. Incidentally the draft was for \$1,000 showing that in some ways Gannett was no cheap penny pincher.

But in the sale of these Frank Leslie juvenile stories about 50 serials could not be used because there was some disput as to whom they belonged.

Now according to all records known about the way they did things in the 70's and 80's in hints and forthright statements found in the Benners notes and elsewhere by me the reason why these serials could not be published is that there was doubt about how they were bought from the original authors. Some authors could get a better deal and therefore when they sold a serial they sold it without book rights. That is only the serial rights were sold but book rights were to be kept by the author. In the case of Robert Bonner he bought a serial only if he got the book rights with it. In the case of Frank Leslie it was optional. Also there was a hassle in the serials published by Frank Leslie as to what author they belonged to.

Despite the impressive record he made with the purchase of the Frank Leslie serials and short stories it was with the Charlotte M. Brame (Bertha M. Clay) output that he made the most money and sales which went on to about \$920. In his various pilgrimages to England (several times

he cycled thru her countryside) he became acquainted with Mrs. Brame's family and they consented to his selling all her serials and short stories published in forgotten periodicals of the past. But there is no record of sales made or prices paid. From what chopped up records there are left of the Benners collection he was paid from \$15 for a short story up to \$300 for a serial. So that sales may have reached higher than \$10,000. For some short stories of novelette size he'd get \$75 and so on depending on the size of the material. What he gave Mrs. Brame's family is not known but since letters from them to him are cordial I believe they were satisfied with his payments. His appreciation for the stories of Mrs. Brame (Clay) was almost on the point of idolatry. When Ralph Cummings gave me part of the William J. Benners collection, at least one-third of the notes were devoted to Clay-Brame productions and in many letters to others he lauds her stories to the skies. I remember in the twenties of this century that women were so devoted to the Bertha Clay cult that many of them read only those books that virtually imitated her. There is not a single doubt that Mrs. Brame (Clay) dominated the reading public for a half century that there was not a single competitor of any material significance. In England her bookss were published as late as World War II so devoted were her countrywomen to her writings. This frail little woman was fabulous all right.

So much so that among those known to have written under her American nom de plume Bertha M. Clay were the following: John R. Coryell, Fred. V. Dey, Gilbert Patten, William Wallace Cook, William J. Benners and the English author Charles Garvice and there is no doubt others not now known to us. Of the 500 stories credited to Bertha M. Clay, she wrote some 200, the rest were the work of aliens so to speak, although a few English writers are supposed to have written under her true name but I have not substantiated this. My opin-

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Ethel E. Taylor

307 E. Gowen Avenue

Philadelphia 19, Pa.

ion from a study of the Benners notes is that Charles Garvice did not write Clay stories but that his old serials were reprinted by Bertha M. Clay. The same goes for Thomas W. Hanshew who never wrote Clay stories but one or two of his stories with an English locale may have been reprinted as by her. Benners definitely says Hanshew never wrote Clay love stories. He did write a serial for Family Story Paper called Lady Scarsdale's Secret which was claimed to be a companion story of Dora Thorne, which was written by the original Charlotte M. Brame, but the serial is signed Thomas W. Hanshew. Unless this is found in the Clay stories we cannot place Hanshew's name in the Clay column.

In a letter to Ralph Cummings, undated, Benners gives a brief synopsis of his reading life and it confirms the fact that he was an avowed reader of dime novels from 8 years of age to love stories in later life. Two years later he began his poetical career and about 25 years of age he began writing some serials for George Munro's N. Y. Fireside Companion, and later on in the 90's for The Chicago Ledger. The editor of the latter paper, Alfred B. Luger who wrote Nick Carter stories on the side, was severe with Benners output and his career as a serialist did not last long. In one transaction Benners and Street & Smith haggled a year over his Lady Ana's Sin, published finally in New York Weekly about 1899 as by Bertha M. Clay. In fact it was Warren Price who in his Book & Newsdealer, San Francisco, May 15, 1892 remarked, "The Unseen Bridegroom wending its weary way in the Fireside Companion first saw light in type some twenty-three years ago. It has since been 'edited' by W. D. Benners, Jr." The publishers seem to have agreed with this verdict because he sold few serials and shorts. Even his brief stage career was a disappointment and despite this card in N. Y. Dramatic Mirror, July 8, 1893, which was advertised a full year

Benners) is at liberty to sign for juvenile or light comedy roles. He is stopping at Wayne, Pa." he never reached Broadway.

Too many distractions caused Benners to postpone his magnum opus "Popular Writers." He became enamored of his subjects. He wrote of personal trivia and they responded in kind. This went on for years making his project a secondary subject. In making a search for his book he amassed a collection of 8,000 items including books, periodicals, libraries, pamphlets and similar material. He also collected without trying hundreds of letters, notes and titles for the projected work. He had gone so much into serial writing that at the turn of the century he was called "the world's greatest authority on old story papers and their writers." In his vast search he accomplished what Warren Price could not do for as Price confessed in his Catalogue of Paper Covered Books, N. Y., 1905 (a supplement to his 1894 edition), "No attempt has been made to solve conundrums or explain the impossible. For example under Braeme (Brame—even in spelling Price made an error) Clay and Garvice are listed books which son of man knows not the author of." But our boy Benners had solved not only Brame (Clay) but Garvice too, and would have given us a lucid account of all serials published in the Ledger, N. Y. Weekly, Fireside Companion, Arm Chair, Saturday Night, Chicago Ledger, Family Story Paper and other adult papers. He also had a grip on all dime novel papers, but his forté was love story writers. Three of them, Mrs. Emma Burke Collins later married to R. R. Starkey, Mrs. Alex McVeigh Miller and Mrs. Mary R. Estey who had written in Fireside Companion as Clara Percy, were his most faithful correspondents. They wrote him remarkable letters until they died, as he outlived most of his old friends.

This vast collection was, according to Ralph F. Cummings, grabbed up by Benners' nieces and destroyed because it was of too personal a nature to let

"Eric Braddon (nom de stage for

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J. P. Guinon

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Little Rock, Ark.

Cummings get hold of. I can honestly say myself that they were right because lots of it that I've seen also was personal. In his last days, to his undying credit, Benners was manfully nursed by Pard Ralph Cummings and in return Benners gave him his collection of notes. But there are big gaps in it and many answers are left in the air. For instance the identity of Philip S. Warne is still a mystery. The fate of Edward L. Wheeler who gave to American literature the great myth Deadwood Dick is not resolved. We know as much as we did in 1885 when Wheeler vanished never to be heard from again. Who was Margaret Blount? She was claimed by England, Wales, Ireland and the United States the most fantastic woman in the sensational novel, and whose other name was Mary O. Francis. Which is the true name?

I solved one puzzle, that of Mary Grace Halpine. She was a prolific love story writer of the past century. No one seemed to know about her, whether she was real or just another pseudonym. By chance I found her obituary (in 1892) in the Brooklyn Eagle under the name Grace Halpine together with a two column biography. My opinion is she died of exhaustion working for her relatives. The biography virtually calls her a saint for the good she did. She was the daughter of a minister. It took 60 years to find her. Ironically Benners had little or no notes on her.

But of these 3 there is deep dark mystery:

Edward L. Wheeler, creator of Deadwood Dick, precursor of his imitation, the Lone Ranger.

Philip S. Warne, according to Prof. Albert Johannsen, one of the top notch Western writers for Beadle & Adams.

Margaret Blount—wrote in England and the United States and may have written in Wales and Ireland.

Creating myths themselves, they in turn became myths.

As to Wheeler, Benners echoes others by claiming "he went West." In the 19th century that expression

meant death. When someone asked another "What happened to so and so" the answer would be if he died, "He went West." The word death was never uttered. It was a nice way of saying he's dead. So that confusion is piled on confusion over Wheeler. The Philadelphia directory asserts he died in plain English but when it comes to Wheeler I don't know what to think. He became such a myth in his own life that maybe we'll never know what happened to him, creator of the myth that will live so long as the old American West lives in the heart of man. Last century, Deadwood Dick, this century Lone Ranger, next century Man of Mystery?

Although Benners had many sweethearts he never married. He was at one time engaged to Laura Jean Libbey, another love story writer who in fact was beyond Cavil the most sensational of all. Bertha Clay in comparison was more conservative. It is really known that when her latest novel was put on sale, usually in paper covers, the financial district of New York City stopped work to gawk at Libby's latest heart throbs. Ralph Cummings does not know why the marriage never came off. This happened before he was 30. He was then in his prime "quite the handsomest of men, tall, dark and independent."

But at his death in Philadelphia on April 4, 1940, at 77 he was a shadow of his former self due to a long illness. Fortunately for us, Cummings was there nursing him and was able to get some of the notes so that this biography was at all possible. Of course we cannot put a finger on just why he never put out the book that he had dreamed about for more than 40 years. He certainly was side-tracked when he went into the literary agent business about 1900 to 1915 just when the book was to have been published. He did make a magnificent try of it. He tackled the very names that others were scared away from because the task loomed large and forbidding. It may be too that Benners was that type who always climbed mountains but never reached the top. Comple-

tion was never for some. The two fatal words *The End* may be applied to some but not to all. For a man like Benners there will never be an end. For it is unique that despite his lofty ideas he was a member of The Union League at his death, a mun-lane club for the rich.

The only known pseudonyms known to be used by him were Eric Braddon, Wyne Winters, and Bertha M. Clay.

Most of the facts gathered here came from the Benners Collection now owned by Ralph F. Cummings together with the portrait herewith printed.

NEWSY NEWS

By Ralph F. Cummings
Fisherville, Mass.

I've been reading some of poor old Charlie Jonas's letters, sent me around 15 years ago. What a friend he was only to lose him in the end, when he died Dec. 5th, 1945. We all lost a real honest to goodness friend, and he was a real friend too, and even though he was a very sick man, he loved to exchange letters with his friends, and what information he had under his cap or hat, if he wore one, sure was wonderful. How he did suffer, why the good Lord had him suffer so much I don't know I'm sure. A man that would never hurt a flea, and was good to young and old. Also another old timer, John Maroney, who passed away around the 1st of August, 1931. Ray Caldwell, who died on Jan. 10th, 1953 and George Hess on March 22nd, 1954—all very swell fellows, and what they didn't know about novels isn't even worth mentioning, also Wm. J. (Uncle Billee) Benners and many more. We miss them all—they were all great men in our field. God bless them all this Christmas day, wherever they may be.

Mrs. Mary Craig Sinclair has just published a book called "Southern Belle." It is about life in the South. She is the wife of Upton Sinclair, the only living dime novelist today. It sure is a very fine book,

and I know all that get a copy will not be sorry.

You know, Pards, back in 1913 or early 1914 I bought my first nickel novels from Eugene J. Le Maire, who is now my post master. I was 15 or 16 years old at that time. I bought such novels as *Secret Service* and *Liberty Boys of 76*, they were my two favorites. Next best were *Young Wild West* and *Pluck and Luck*, of the *Tousey Big Six*. Gosh, when I remember back to those days, I used to read every chance I could get, when I peddled milk for my father, even when I milked the cows, I had 4 patented milking tubes, which I used while I read. Oh boy, those were the days. I never knew what a novel was before 1913 until a youngster who was helping us to peddle milk had a *Secret Service*, I believe it was, stuck in his back pocket, and he'd tell me what wonderful stories there were in them, so I asked if I could borrow a copy to read, and oh boy, that was my start in reading the old timers. Think I learned more from them than I ever did in school.

Does anyone have information about a Rowland Roberts who wrote his name in many Munro's Ten Cent Novels with his address as Florsham, Montgomery County, Pa.? He also used a stamp with the address, Wil-lowgrove, Pa. Information should be sent to the Editor or to Mr. E. B. Stanford, Director of Libraries, University of Minnesota.

Atlantic gasoline will use one of George French's scenic photos on its outdoor billboards this spring.

Eli Messier tells me there is a fine article on old nickel novels in the July 1958 issue of *Saga Magazine*, with illustrations, also a fine article in the August issue on Ned Buntline.

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